RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE MONSTROUS

OF GODS AND MONSTERS

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Chapter 13

Thomas Jefferson

The First Cryptozoologist?

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According to a 2007 survey by Baylor University, roughly 13 percent of Americans believe in the flesh-and-blood reality of creatures such as Bigfoot, the Yeti, and the Loch Ness Monster ("Belief in Bigfoot"). While it is unclear how many of those millions of Americans actively search for these beasts those dedicated monster hunters who do frequently refer to themselves as cryptozoologists and their quarry as cryptids, both terms derived from cryptozoology: "the study of hidden animals."

Cryptozoology is a contested field. No university offers a degree in it and so the vast majority of self-professed cryptozoologists lack any formal academic training in those fields that intersect with their interests, such as zoology, paleontology, or evolutionary biology (Regal 2011, 173). Because their various hunts have failed to yield compelling physical evidence (i.e., a body) to prove the existence of any cryptid, cryptozoologists instead can only offer myths, legends, eye-witness accounts, and conjectures as proof of the beasts they seek. Eschewing the rigors of science, cryptozoologists publish for a popular audience rather than for experts resulting in the practice itself frequently being derided as a pseudoscience.

Historians attempting to trace the beginnings of cryptozoology typically locate the practice's origins in the mid-twentieth century when Belgian-French zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans (1916–2001), with deference to Scottish-born naturalist Ivan T. Sanderson (1911–1973), is believed to have coined the term (Poole 2011, 134; Regal 2011, 18–19).[1] The problem with this however is that the aims, aspirations, and methodologies of cryptozoology clearly predate the word itself in both fact and fiction. Heuvelmans acknowledged this crediting both the science-fiction work of authors such as Jules Verne and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as well as the research of Dutch zoologist A. C. Oudemans (1858–1943) with sparking his own interest in

the subject of the hypothetical existence of fantastic beasts (Miller 2015, 149–51).

If cryptozoology does not begin with Heuvelmans and Sanderson, however, then where does one truly begin when looking for the historical starting point of the field? I would suggest one start with Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826): Founding Father of the United States, author of the Declaration of Independence, and third president of the United States. Yes, Thomas Jefferson also deserves recognition as one of the pioneers of cryptozoology.

There is no question that the labeling of Thomas Jefferson as a cryptozoologist is anachronistic. However, I contend that the benefits of looking at Jefferson as such a practitioner more than makes-up for any blurring of the linguistic timeline as doing so can provide one with valuable insight into the reasoning and impetus behind cryptozoology and what may motivate some people to go monster hunting.

THE POLITICS OF NATURAL HISTORY IN JEFFERSON'S TIME

To understand the cryptozoological activities of Jefferson one must start by first understanding the life and work of a very different man: mathematician and naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc (1707–1788), the Count of Buffon. A member of the French Royal Academy of Science and the Royal Society of London as well the Curator of King Louis XV's Royal Botanical Gardens, Buffon was the eighteenth-century equivalent of a celebrity-scientist (Knapp 2019, 121–7). As Joe Hanson put it, imagine Buffon as "Carl Sagan in a powdered wig" and you'll be on the right track (Hanson 2015).

Buffon's magnum opus was a thirty-six-volume encyclopedia titled *Natural History: General and Particular* (1749–1788), which proclaimed to unveil "the true history of each thing" (Dugatkin 2009, 17). The book was a best-seller during its time, selling out in its first six weeks. Part of this can be attributed to the provocative nature of its contents, which included the first-ever attempt by anyone to put forth a completely secular scenario for the origin of the Earth. Buffon theorized that the Earth was formed when a comet struck the sun, tearing away pieces of it. These pieces had initially been white hot before gradually cooling to a point where life could form. Based on experiments he had conducted with heated iron spheres Buffon dismissed the then commonly held belief that the Earth was only around 6,000 years old and instead insisted that it must be many tens of thousands, if not millions of years older. Such heterodox conjectures landed Buffon in hot water with the Faculty of Theology in Paris and in 1764 he was accused of promoting atheism. Buffon finagled his way out

of this charge by claiming that his idea regarding the origin of the planet was merely a thought experiment and that he had no interest in infringing upon the church's authority. However, modern historians of science generally agree that Buffon was, in all likelihood, an atheist (Rudwick 1985, 93–5; Switek 2010, 175, 277 n. 59; Knapp 2019, 125–6).

Cosmological conjectures aside the second most provocative aspect of *Natural History*, and what helped make it one of the most talked-about works of the eighteenth century, was Buffon's theory of American degeneracy. Stemming from his supposition that heat had been instrumental to the development of life on Earth, Buffon became one of the first naturalists to argue that the environment played a vital role in how various animals reached their present state. However, his ideas about how this worked are, by today's standards, a bit odd. According to Buffon animals which developed in parts of the world where it was warm and dry tended to be powerful, robust, and fertile while animals which developed in parts of the world which were cold and wet tended to be degenerate: which is to say that they were weak, cowardly, and infertile. Though Buffon would never set foot in the Americas he was nevertheless convinced that the entire New World was, essentially, one big cold wet swamp.[2] Ergo all American animals could be assumed to be smaller and more pathetic than the animals found in the Old World. Nowhere in America were there animals as large and impressive as the Old World's elephants and hippopotamuses, its lions or tigers. Likewise, animals that the New World did have—such as wolves and deer—were deemed inferior to their European counterparts.

Such scientific theorizing took on a political dimension as well since, for Buffon, human societies tended to mimic the animals they developed alongside, an idea that if not clear from Buffon's often purple prose, was unavoidable in *Natural History*'s copious illustrations. Most of these drawings were by artist Jacques de Sève, who, under Buffon's direction, frequently exaggerated the size and grandeur of various animals. Scholar of animal-human relations Boria Sax observes that Sève's illustration of a giraffe shows a specimen so large and robust that it looks more like a dinosaur (Sax 2018, 38).[3] In addition, Sève's depictions of the book's various beasts and birds find them not in naturalistic settings but rather inhabiting "landscapes filled with picturesque ruins, broken statues, pedestals and columns," castles, bridges, and ramparts: images associated with classical western civilization and republicanism (Semonin 2000, 132–3). The implication then regarding the fledging American colonies could not have been clearer. If American animals were degenerate, then so too would be any human society that sprung up alongside them.

Thomas Jefferson: Monster Hunter

In April 1775, the American Revolutionary War broke out, just one month after Thomas Jefferson—previously employed as a lawyer—was elected to the Continental Congress as the representative of Virginia. The following year he would draft the American Declaration of Independence. A graduate from the College of William & Mary in 1762, Jefferson studied mathematics and philosophy while developing a profound love of the sciences. As a result, he was already well acquainted with Buffon's *Natural History*, including its theory of degeneracy. Jefferson was also perceptive enough to realize that such conjecture posed a potential threat to American democracy in its libelous accusation of New World zoological impotency.

Though France served as America's primary ally during the Revolutionary War, officially entering it in 1778, this was not a decision that all French citizens uniformly supported. Historian Philippe Roger has shown that a significant cabal of French intellectuals opposed this intervention on the basis of Buffon's theory of degeneracy arguing that there was nothing to be gained from fighting over a land of sickly animals, noxious plants, and uppity colonists (Dugatkin 2009, 29). Concerns about the potential of America's natural resources among the French were real enough that in 1780 François Barbé-Marbois, then secretary of the French delegation in Philadelphia, sent out a questionnaire to various representatives asking them to inventory their state's flora and fauna. Jefferson's answer to this inquiry came in the form of his one and only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), published two years after the end of the Revolutionary War and described by various historians as the most important book in American history prior to 1800 (Ibid., 68).

Jefferson was not the only Founding Father to repudiate Buffon's allegations of American degeneracy. Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison also all took up their pens against Buffon's claims, but only their pens. It was Jefferson alone who attempted to take the fight beyond the printed page and into the realm of hard science (Ibid., 47). Central to Buffon's argument had been the assertion that America boasted no large animals. If Jefferson was going to show Buffon, and the rest of the world, just how impressive he believed America, and by extension Americans, truly was then he was going to need animals that were larger and more awe-inspiring than any ever found in the Old World. In short, Jefferson was going to need monsters.

This set of circumstances resulted in Jefferson's first foray into cryptozoological speculation. In December 1781, while writing *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson learned that in 1739 French explorer Charles le Moyne had traveled down the Ohio River with a contingent of Algonquians and Iroquois, coming across a saltlick located in what is present-day Kentucky. There they discovered scores of gigantic bones; many eroding right out of

the marshy ground. The Frenchman collected some of these strange bones including a 3½-foot long thigh, a single tooth weighing 10 pounds, and a tusk like that of an elephant. Because of this they designated this location as "the place where the elephant bones are found"; a description that would be reprinted on French maps of the New World for the next two decades (Kolbert 2014, 25–8; Semonin 2000, 88, 97).

These bones eventually made it back to France where they received the attention of the country's leading naturalists including Buffon who actually mentions them in his *Natural History*. Buffon agreed that the tusk and thigh bones were most likely those of an elephant, but the tooth gave him pause. This tooth was a molar, covered with sharp bulbous points, built for chewing. Modern elephants have no such teeth. Buffon's conclusion was that the knobby tooth must have come from a different animal, probably a hippopotamus (Hedeen 2008, 38).

Still in December 1781, Jefferson, deciding that he needed to examine these bones for himself, dispatched none other than legendary frontiersman Daniel Boone (1734–1820) to convey a letter to General George Rogers Clark (1752–1818), commander of the Army of the West, asking that he collect and send Jefferson some of these extraordinary bones. Clark agreed to the request but would not actually get around to it until February of 1784 (Semonin 2000, 184–5; Hedeen 2008, 65).

Upon having a chance to review the mysterious bones and grinding teeth, Jefferson—unsurprisingly—found that he fiercely disagreed with Buffon. In *Notes* Jefferson savagely attacks the French naturalist's conclusion that the bones belong to two different animals wryly noting that "wherever these grinders are found, there also we find the tusks and skeleton; but no skeleton of the hippopotamus nor grinders of the elephant. It will not be said that the hippopotamus and elephant come always to the same spot, the former to deposit his grinders, and the latter his tusks and skeleton?" (Jefferson 1785, 42).

Rather Jefferson felt that the only logical conclusion was that the bones belonged to a single hitherto unrecognized species, an opinion shared by Scottish anatomist William Hunter (1718–1783)—the personal physician of England's Queen Charlotte—who had also examined the fossils sent back to France. Hunter argued that not only were the bones and teeth from the same animal, which was neither an elephant nor a hippo but that the mystifying molars most closely resembled those of a carnivore. Hunter also felt that this American "monster" was related, in some way, to a similar elephantine creature whose remains had been discovered thawing out of the Siberian tundra in the early seventeenth century and called a "mammoth" by locals there. On the basis of this assessment, Hunter dubbed the mysterious creature the *Incognitum*—literally "Unknown Animal"—making it, semantically, the original cryptid (Semonin 2000, 137; Kolbert 2014, 27).

The idea of an unknown giant carnivorous monster similar to the Siberian mammoth, but hailing from the New World, excited Jefferson. Here, at last, was the kind of creature he needed to refute Buffon's libelous accusations of American degeneracy. The Incognitum also reminded Jefferson of a story he had heard sometime between 1775 and 1781 from "a delegation of warriors from the Delaware tribe" who said that the huge bones which had come from the lick were those of the "Big Buffalo" who "in ancient times" had "begun a universal destruction" of the local wildlife ultimately resulting in "the Great Man above" descending from heaven, armed with lightning, and slaughtering the whole heard until only a single "big bull" remained. This bull then fled "over the Ohio, over the Wabash, the Illinois, and finally over the great lakes, where he is living to this day" (Jefferson 1785, 40–1; Hedeen 2008, 26–7).

Folklorist Adrienne Mayor has documented that the Delaware were not the only tribe with stories associating the fossils at Big Bone Lick with monsters that had been wiped out by supernatural means (Mayor 2005, 1–72). Jefferson, however, was a deist which meant that while he did believe in a God who was the author of all creation he did not believe that this deity worked miracles or engaged in other forms of divine intervention (Holmes 2006). It was Jefferson's deism which led him to create the Jefferson Bible—a copy of the New Testament from which he excised all references to miracles including Christ's resurrection—as well as to deny the reality of extinction. In *Notes* Jefferson argues that "such is the economy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken" (Jefferson 1785, 54). Jefferson's skepticism regarding extinction was rooted in his belief that God had created the world as a machine so finely tuned as to never be in need of maintenance—hence no miracles. Therefore, if even one piece was to vanish—that is, go extinct—then the whole apparatus would break down and cease to function.

Furthermore, Jefferson reasoned that just because no one had ever seen a living Incognitum or mammoth—Jefferson would use the terms interchangeably—did not mean there were not any out there. As French historian of science Claudine Cohen muses, being "a good lawyer, Jefferson refused to accept negative arguments as proof" when considering the idea that monstrous creatures could be hiding "in the northern and western parts of America" (Cohen 1994, 86–7). In fact, the possibility seemed completely plausible to Jefferson since "those parts still remain in their aboriginal state, unexplored and undisturbed by us" (Jefferson 1785, 54). For Jefferson the reality of the Incognitum was a given, so much so that he included it on a list of known North American terrestrial animals published in *Notes* (Jefferson 1785, 49). All that remained now was the simple matter of finding one.

Though the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the battle for America's dignity was still raging (Switek 2010, 174). Jefferson would soon be appointed ambassador to France, a job that would uniquely position him to confront Buffon face-to-face over the issue of American degeneracy. Jefferson, therefore, could not wait for some intrepid explorer to find him a living mammoth, he needed a bona fide example of American megafauna and he needed it now. And as it turned out, Jefferson knew exactly what animal might do the job. In the spring of 1784, just prior to his voyage to France, Jefferson tasked attorney general of New Hampshire John Sullivan with procuring him the skeleton, antlers, and skin of a suitably large moose and shipping them to him in Paris, making it clear that money was no object as the acquisition of such an animal was "more precious than you can imagine" (Dugatkin 2009, 96). Specifically, Jefferson wanted a moose so large that a European reindeer—which on average grow to about 4 ½ feet at the shoulder—could walk underneath it. Why? Because Buffon had greatly exaggerated the size and majesty of the European reindeer in his *Natural History* and Jefferson was eager to prove that the American moose was even greater (Ibid., 19–20).

As was the case with the Incognitum, Jefferson's conviction that he could locate such a monstrous moose was largely rooted in rumor and hearsay. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale, had told Jefferson that he had seen a *female moose calf* at least as tall as an adult male reindeer. Sullivan also spoke to local hunters who claimed they had seen adult male moose that stood 8 ½ to 10 feet at the shoulder while Sullivan himself claimed that in one Pequawket village he had seen an antler from a moose so large that it was used as a baby's cradle. A 1798 New York broadside upped the size of the average moose to 12-feet at the shoulder, or twice as tall as the largest adult male moose on record (Ibid., 91–4).

However, by late 1785, Sullivan had still not managed to locate such an oversized ungulate. By this point, Jefferson had finally managed to secure an audience with Buffon and the two men dined together at the Count's home in January of 1786. Even though Jefferson still did not have his moose, he nevertheless proceeded to lecture Buffon on the size and power of the animal. While skeptical of Jefferson's claims, Buffon was opened-minded which encouraged Jefferson's conviction that should Sullivan find him a suitably robust moose he could persuade Buffon to renounce his theory of American degeneracy.

Sullivan's team of contracted hunters finally managed to bag a moose for Jefferson in the winter of 1787, though it was only a seven-footer and the antlers were, somehow, lost in the process. Jefferson would not receive his moose skeleton and skin—along with the antlers of a different moose—until September 1788 at which time he had them sent straightaway to Buffon along with a note apologizing that the specimen was on the smaller side but

assuring the Count that American moose did get much larger. How much of an impression Jefferson's moose made on Buffon, if any at all, is unknown. Within six months of receiving the moose, Buffon was dead—having never detracted his claim of American zoological inferiority.

A CRYPTOZOOLOGIST IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Though Buffon was now gone, Jefferson considered the issue of American degeneracy far from over. Jefferson returned to the United States in 1789 becoming the first secretary of state under President George Washington, a position he held until 1793. Jefferson began campaigning for the presidency in 1796 but lost to John Adams thus becoming the vice president in 1797. That same year, however, Jefferson was elected the third president of the American Philosophical Society, the foremost scientific organization in the United States at that time. Jefferson had been a member since 1780 and would remain president until 1819. It was during this period that Jefferson resumed his cryptozoological activities.

In the spring of 1796, several large fossil bones were uncovered in a West Virginia cave. The fossils were fragmentary consisting of only "a femur, radius, ulna, three claws and other miscellaneous foot bones" (Debus 2010, 38). Based primarily on the three tremendous claws, Jefferson deduced that the animal was a new species of enormous cat and immediately set to work preparing a formal scientific paper on it that he presented to the American Philosophical Society on March 10, 1797. Titled, "A Memoir on the Discovery of Certain Bones of a Quadruped of the Clawed Kind in the Western Parts of Virginia," Jefferson argued that the fossils belonged to a tremendous relative of the African lion. Using what Allen A. Debus describes as "error-prone, back-of-the-envelope type calculations" Jefferson estimated the size and weight of his hypothetical lion ultimately producing a beast which was "7-feet-high, and would weigh 2,000 pounds" at its most "monstrous" (Debus 2010, 39; Jefferson 1797) This is a good 4-feet taller and over 15-hundred pounds heavier than the largest adult male African lion on record. Because the longest of the three claws was 7 ½ inches Jefferson dubbed his new species *Megalonyx*; literally "Great-Claw" (Thomson 2008, 34–40).

As with the Incognitum, Jefferson did not believe that the presence of fossil bones meant that his Megalonyx was extinct and echoed his earlier deist conviction in the divine "economy of nature." Seeking further proof of the giant lion's continued presence in North America Jefferson, as he had with the Incognitum, cited as evidence Native American legends—"heretofore considered as fables" but having "regained credit since the discovery of these bones"—and petroglyphs which described and depicted an animal he thought

sounded like and resembled an African lion. In addition, as with his giant moose, Jefferson also relied heavily on travelers' tales. In one account, from "little more than 30-years ago," Jefferson related how a "company of adventurers" had described hearing "terrible roarings of some animal unknown to them" which "went round and round their camp" with "eyes like two balls of fire" glowing in the night (Jefferson 1797).

Having outlined his evidence for the Megalonyx's existence, Jefferson concluded his paper with a renewed repudiation of Buffon's theory of American degeneracy. How could anyone claim that the New World was zoologically inferior to the Old when it boasted monsters such as the Megalonyx and the mammoth? And just like the mammoth, Jefferson was sure it was only a matter of time before a living specimen of his Megalonyx was obtained since much of the North American interior still remained unexplored and "there is surely space and range enough for elephants and lions, if in that climate they could subsist; and for mammoths and Megalonyxes who may subsist there. Our entire ignorance of the immense country to the West and North West, and of its contents, does not authorize us to say what it does not contain" (Ibid.).

In 1799, Jefferson published his paper, but now with a brief note appended to the end. This came about a result of Jefferson rediscovering, in the interim between his presentation and publication, an article among his files concerning the discovery of bones similar to those of his Megalonyx in Spanish Argentina. While the original scientists to examine these fossils also concluded, as Jefferson had, that these were the remains of a giant cat, a brilliant young French scientist, George Cuvier (1769–1832)—who was very much Buffon's successor in status and influence—used his new method of comparative anatomy to deduce that these bones came from a giant sloth which he dubbed Megatherium (Pimentel 2017, 152–96).

Jefferson was reluctant to acknowledge his mistake but eventually did. Nor would this be the last error of Jefferson's that Cuvier would bring to light. In the early nineteenth century, Cuvier would identify Jefferson's Incognitum as a type of prehistoric elephant which he dubbed the Mastodon; and like all pachyderms it was an herbivore. Cuvier would also be the first to make a compelling argument for the reality of mass extinction. This, however, was a reality that Jefferson had an especially hard time accepting.

Two years after becoming president of the United States in 1801, Jefferson succeeded in doubling the size of the country via the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson did this in part because he believed that this newly acquired territory was the key to finding his much sought-after American megafauna. He shared this belief with the celebrated explorers Captain Meriwether Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark—the latter the younger brother of Jefferson's previous fossil emissary General George Rogers Clark—asking them to be on the lookout for any animals deemed "rare or extinct" (Thomson

2008, 59–60). Likewise in a February 1803 letter to a Parisian acquaintance Jefferson wrote that "it is not impossible that this voyage of discovery will procure us further information of the Mammoth and of the Megatherium" (Semonin 2000, 344).[4] Jefferson's reference to "the Mammoth and . . . the Megatherium" shows that while the president had recognized that his giant lion was actually a sloth, he still held out hope that it was a living species. Even after the Lewis and Clark expedition returned without any prehistoric monsters in tow, Jefferson remained resistant to the idea of extinction for most of his life finally acquiescing only three years before his death in 1826 (Hedeen 2008, 103–4).

Moreover, Jefferson's monster obsession was not without its political liabilities. In 1809, as Jefferson's presidency was coming to an end and he was working to assure that his fellow Democratic-Republican James Madison would become the next president, his political rivals in the Federalist party published the nineteenth-century equivalent of a political attack ad in the form of a poem lampooning Jefferson's preoccupation with extraordinary animals:

> Go, wretch, resign thy presidential chair,
> Disclose thy secret measures, foul or fair,
> Go search with curious eyes for horned frogs,
> Mid the wild wastes of Louisianan bogs;
> Or Where the Ohio rolls his turbid streams
> Dig for huge bones, thy glory and thy theme

W. J. T. Mitchell observes that Jefferson had hoped that the mammoth would serve not only as a biological refutation of Buffon's ideas but also become "the first symbolic 'political animal' of the United States, an emblem of Jefferson's vision of an ever-expanding continental empire of small farmers and artisans." Such a symbol was important since Jefferson "like . . . every American politician since, [aimed] to create the illusion that his party was above politics, and that his vision of a natural constitution would, like the paper constitution, provide a frame within which all parties could cooperate" (Mitchell 1998, 119).

THE FORGOTTEN CRYPTOZOOLOGIST

Despite all of this, Jefferson's work as a pioneering cryptozoologist has been largely forgotten.[5] However, in reflecting upon Jefferson's pursuit of hypothetical American megafauna it is impossible to ignore the degree to which the methodologies and assumptions employed by the Founding

Father regarding his belief in giant monsters roaming the unexplored regions of North America perfectly align with those employed by practicing cryptozoologists.

Like modern cryptozoologists, Jefferson relied heavily on the myths and legends of monsters told by indigenous peoples to support his assertion that such creatures actually exist as seen in his pursuit of the Incognitum, giant moose, and Megalonyx. While this type of ethno-knowledge has often proved helpful to field zoologists in identifying new species, cryptozoologists' assertion that all mythical and legendary creatures must be based on unknown real animals is both reductive with regards to understanding folklore and has so far failed to generate any worthwhile results in their various monster hunts (Naish 2017, 11–29).[6]

Along this same line, Jefferson's extensive use of anecdotal evidence of people's alleged sightings or encounters with unfamiliar animals, seen in the case of both the moose and Megalonyx, remains the foundation upon which the existence of most cryptids is based. When critics of cryptozoology point out that humans are not naturally good observers—let alone good at identifying wild animals when they have had no formal training in doing so—many modern cryptozoologists respond as Jefferson did in his day by reasserting both the witness's assumed familiarity with local wildlife and their general honesty as individuals—honesty here apparently precluding one's ability to make honest mistakes.

Additionally, there is Jefferson's argument that his monsters could be hiding in remote areas seldom visited by man. If this line of argument sounds familiar it is because it is still regularly marshaled by contemporary cryptozoologists to explain why they believe there is a chance of finding dinosaurs lurking in the jungles of Africa, sea monsters at the bottom of the ocean, or even a colony of Sasquatches in the deep Pacific Northwest woods (Heuvelmans 1995, 3–17; Heuvelmans 2007, 77–93).

But another prominent parallel between Jefferson and modern cryptozoologists is that in attempting to account for the existence of his various monsters Jefferson invoked what paleobiologist Darren Naish has termed the "prehistoric survivor paradigm" of cryptozoology in which various cryptids are identified as animals otherwise known only from the fossil record (Naish 2017, 38). Boria Sax notes that the willingness of cryptozoologists to claim that numerous supposed monsters are really prehistoric holdovers speaks to a general resistance among some to accepting the realities of geological deep time and mass extinction (Sax 2018, 169–72).[7] Jefferson shared these doubts largely as a result of his religious convictions and there is strong evidence to indicate that many in the cryptozoological community harbor similar faith-based misgivings (Laycock 2010; Regal 2011, 173; Poole 2011, 134–5; Loxton and Prothero 2013, 285–95, 308–9; Bielo 2016, 81–101).

Equally important as all of this however is the fact that Jefferson's cryptozoological pursuits were motivated, in part, by his deep and abiding love of science. Skeptics often defame cryptozoologists as harboring a fundamentally anti-intellectual mindset despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary (Naish 2017, 218–21). Jefferson was many things but he certainly was not anti-intellectual. As President John F. Kennedy once told a party of Nobel Prize laureates, they represented "the most extraordinary collection of . . . human knowledge that has ever been gathered together at the White House" since "Thomas Jefferson dined alone" (Anderson 2012, 283 n. 11).

So what did motivate Jefferson to go out and hunt monsters? As we have seen Jefferson's cryptozoological activities were primarily attempts by the Founding Father to exonerate America from Buffon's charge of zoological, and by extension national, degeneracy. In this vein, Jefferson's cryptids were, as geologist David Bressan put it, quite literally "patriotic monsters" (Bressan 2014). Furthermore, in his 2009 book *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend* researcher Joshua Blu Buhs characterized the debate over the existence of Sasquatch as a "contest for dignity" between the working class and academic elites. Historian of science Brian Regal came to a similar conclusion in his book *Searching for Sasquatch* (2011) arguing that cryptozoology represented the contested ground between amateur and professional science. Such theoretical frameworks apply perfectly to the case of Jefferson and Buffon. Buffon was a professional scientist while Jefferson an enthusiastic amateur. Buffon embodied the height of French aristocracy while Jefferson, despite accruing significant political power during his lifetime, nevertheless always saw himself as a simple blue-collar farmer.

But as the story of Thomas Jefferson as monster hunter reveals, this type of contest for dignity goes beyond individuals or even class structures. Cryptids can become symbols of national identity and the motivation for perusing them the desire to secure one's country's place on the world stage. The subject of the vitality of America's plant and animal life would remain a contested issue well into the early nineteenth century before finally being put to rest by the celebrated naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt (1769–1859) who was also a great admirer of Jefferson and spent a week with him at the White House in 1804 (Wulf 2015, 94–108). Ultimately it was Humboldt's meticulous fieldwork examining the flora and fauna of the New World, rather than Jefferson's posturing or monster hunting, which would strike the death blow to Buffon's theory of American degeneracy.

Today, few Americans are even aware of Buffon's slanderous science or the role it played in the origins of their country. Conversely, as historian W. Scott Poole observes, Jefferson's preoccupation with monsters "in early America" can be seen as the beginnings of what continues to be "a huge body of popular belief about other wondrous creatures of the New World, from

Big Foot to sea serpents, lake monsters, and lizard men" (Poole 2011, 12). In other words, it is Thomas Jefferson who can be credited with the very origins of cryptozoology.

NOTES

1. The question of who exactly coined the term cryptozoology—Heuvelmans, Sanderson or even possibly someone else—remains a controversial subject (Loxton and Prothero 2013, 16–17).

2. It probably didn't help matters that the nation's capital was actually built in a swamp (Wulf 2015, 98).

3. See Jay M. Smith's essay "Dreadful Enemies" for more on Buffon's theatrical description of various animals and how his description of one, the hyena, helped to create another cryptid: The Beast of Gévaudan (Smith 2016, 33–61).

4. In fact, Jefferson's conviction that his American monsters existed somewhere in the unexplored interior of America was a belief he had expressed as far back as 1784 in correspondence with Ezra Stiles (Mayor 2005, 57).

5. During the course of my research, I came across only a few works that made the connection between Jefferson and cryptozoology, and then only partially. On the subject of the Megalonyx, Debus writes that "Jefferson was a contemporary cryptozoologist" (Debus 2010, 40) while in a footnote Loxton and Prothero describe "Jefferson's speculation" that mammoths may have found refuge in the American interior an "example of cryptozoology" (Loxton and Prothero 2013, 371–2, no. 105). Most intriguing Heuvelmans, in a posthumously published work, wrote that Jefferson's methodology regarding the Megalonyx was "a perfect example of the cryptozoological approach" evidentially untroubled by the fact that all of Jefferson's conclusions about the animal were wrong (Heuvelmans 2007, 100).

6. While there is certainly some truth to the idea that every animal was a mythical animal before it was formally discovered by science, cryptozoologists badly misrepresent the reality of this fact as explained clearly and succinctly by paleobiologist Darren Naish in his book *Hunting Monsters: Cryptozoology and the Reality Behind the Myths* (2007).

7. Both Peter Dendle and Robert L. France have argued that cryptozoology as a whole can be seen as a result of a refusal to deal with the reality of extinction (Dendle 2006, 190–206; France 2017, 66).